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VIKTOR KRIVULIN AND ALEKSANDR MIRONOV: THE QUEST FOR SACRED LANGUAGE IN 1970s RUSSIAN POETRY

Many of the poets who belonged to the unofficial cultural sphere in 1970s Leningrad produced work that has been noted for its metaphysical pathos.[1] Researchers have correctly attributed this phenomenon to an infatuation with myth and religion, and Orthodox Christianity in particular, which had gripped large parts of the Soviet unofficial intelligentsia. Another source was the critical and creative engagement with the literary and philosophical heritage of the Silver Age, the period of Russian Modernism, which fulfilled an important function as a point of departure for the unofficial poets. However, the prevalence of religious imagery has so far mostly been considered in sociological or literary-historical terms.[2] Few attempts have been made at a specifically aesthetic analysis, such as those undertaken by, for example, Mikhail Epshtein, and in part by Mikhail Berg.[3] My aim is to analyse the aesthetic significance of religious, and specifically Christian, imagery in the poetry of Viktor Krivulin (1944–2001) and Aleksandr Mironov (1948–2010), which, I argue, shows evidence that these writers were searching for ways of reflecting a notion of the sacred in their work.

Some readers will ask how literary language can possibly be 'sacred', given

[1] Researchers use several terms to designate this cultural sphere, including, but not limited to, 'unofficial culture', 'second culture', and 'underground'. I will use the term 'unofficial culture' in accordance with the way this phrase was used by the members of the Leningrad groups, who employed it in order to stress that they were part of Russian culture and in no way inferior to 'official' culture.

[2] Jane Ellis considers various religious groups, including the Religious-Philosophical Seminar, of which Krivulin and Mironov were members, in her survey of the religious revival: *The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History* (London: Croom Helm, 1986). The sociological or historical approach is also evident in the many studies produced retrospectively by the actors themselves, e.g. in *Samizdat: po materialam konferentsii '30 let nezavisimoi pechati. 1950–80e gody'. S.-Peterburg, 25–27 aprelia 1992*, ed. by Viacheslav Dolinin and Boris Ivanov (St Petersburg: NITs 'Memorial', 1993), and *Istoriia leningradskoi nepodtsensurnoi literatury*, ed. by Boris Ivanov and Boris Roginskii (St Petersburg: DEAN, 2000). More recent accounts include Stanislav Savitskii's *Andegraund: istoriia i mify leningradskoi neofitsial'noi literatury* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002) and a number of articles, such as Clint B. Walker, 'The Spirit(s) of the Leningrad Underground', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 43 (1999), 674–98, and Marco Sabbatini, 'Chto rifmovalos" (1990)—refleksiia krizisa neofitsial'noi kul'tury', *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 83 (2007), 710–70.

[3] Mikhail Epshtein, *Postmodern v russkoi literature* (Moscow: Vysshaia shkola, 2005), Chapter 3 ('Literaturnye dvizheniya. Metarealizm. Kontseptualizm. Ar'ergard'), and a number of related works, in particular *Slovo i molchanie: metafizika russkoi literatury* (Moscow: Vysshaia shkola, 2006), Chapter 4 ('Iskusstvo i religioznoe bessoznatel'noe v 2-om veke'). Mikhail Berg's *Literaturokratiia: problema prisvoeniia i pereraspredeleniia vlasti v literature* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000) features insightful sections on both Mironov and Krivulin as part of the chapter 'Novaia literatura 1970–1980-kh'. However, the title clearly shows that the author's main concern is quite different.

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that it operates wholly outside the canon of scriptural and liturgical texts to which, if really sacred, it should belong. When I use the term 'sacred language' or 'sacred text' in relation to literature I mean a text that has a recognizable relationship to a set of religious beliefs. Moreover, I consider the application of this term to 1970s unofficial poetry to be particularly justified in view of its consciously highlighted indebtedness to a literary tradition that indeed cultivated a concept of the literary word as invested with religious and/or incantatory powers.[4] Because of this I also consider the question of the literary word as a vehicle of theological or philosophical insight. The semi-acknowledged quest for 'sacred' language through the identification of literary creativity with religious practice (however spurious) was common among the 1970s unofficial poets. For example, the work of Elena Shvarts, Sergei Stratanovskii, and Oleg Okhapkin exhibits similar concerns.

Viktor Krivulin and Aleksandr Mironov were members of the Religious-Philosophical Seminar, an informal study group that was typical of the unofficial cultural scene in Leningrad in the 1970s.[5] Krivulin co-founded the Seminar in 1974 together with his first wife Tat'iana Goricheva, a former student of philosophy and prolific translator of philosophical and theological literature from German, English, and French, and their friends, the essayist Evgenii Pazukhin and the poet Sergei Stratanovskii. The aim was to provide a platform for the study of the religious beginnings of European civilization, the Church Fathers, Russian religious philosophy, and contemporary Western theology. The weekly Seminar sessions drew a large audience, mainly consisting of 'underground bohemians'—intellectuals, poets, and artists who had been active within the unofficial cultural sphere since the mid-1960s. Among

[4] See e.g. the theurgic experiments of certain members of the symbolists, in particular Aleksandr Blok's 'Poeziia zagovorov i zaklinaniia' of 1906, in A. Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8 vols (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1960–63), v (1962), 36–65; Andrei Belyi's 1910 collection of essays *Simvolizm*, including 'Magiia slov', repr. edn (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1969), and Vyacheslav Ivanov. Another influence, particularly relevant to Krivulin, was Osip Mandel'shtam's personification of the word as a living being in his essays *Slovo i kul'tura* (1921) and *O prirode slova* (1922) (see O. Mandel'shtam, *Sochineniia*, 2 vols (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), II, 167–71 and 172–86).

[5] General information about the Religious-Philosophical Seminar and its members can be found in *Samizdat Leningrada 1950e–1980e: literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, ed. by D. Severiukhin and others (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2003), 445–47. The most substantial accounts, giving insight into the motivation of the Seminar's various members, were published in the Seminar's samizdat journal '*37*'. Only a few of these articles were republished officially, at the time or later. Some were included in the conference volume *Samizdat* (see n. 2 above). E. Pazukhin's 'Russkaia religioznaia filosofiia v podpol'e', in *Preobrazhenie: khristianskii religiozno-filosofskii al'manakh*, ed. by S. Gorbunova (St Petersburg: Zvezda, 1992), pp. 16–24, is a very good, if excessively personal, account. Authors living outside Russia who have written about the Seminar include Ellis, *The Russian Orthodox Church*, and recently, Mark Lipovetsky and Mikhail Berg, 'Literary Criticism of the Long 1970s and the Fate of Soviet Liberalism', in *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond*, ed. by Evgeny Dobrenko and Galin Tihanov (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 207–29.

them were the poets Shvarts, Mironov, and Okhapkin, and the now well-known linguist and cultural historian Boris Groys. The group was unique in that it managed to avoid the nationalist pathos that entranced many young intellectuals who were discovering Orthodoxy as part of their cultural heritage, although it was dominated by recent converts to Orthodoxy. Seminar members cultivated a particular blend of creative ferment and spiritual rapture that is evident in the literary, artistic, and critical works they produced. From the second year of its existence, the Religious-Philosophical Seminar published its own samizdat 'press organ', the journal '*37*', which constitutes a valuable primary source, offering the researcher insight into the heady atmosphere of the unofficial cultural scene in the 1970s.

Religious motifs became a major factor in the poetry of both Krivulin and Mironov around the turn of the decade. Krivulin remembers having a literary epiphany in 1970, which he retrospectively identified as the moment that turned him into a 'real poet'. In its wake he apparently destroyed much of the work he had produced in the preceding years.[6] His published collections, as well as the selection published in samizdat during the 1970s, contain indeed little or no poetry dated before 1970. But the little that is available is sufficient in order to ascertain that religious, and specifically Christian, imagery became a staple in his work only after 1970.[7] What is more, his literary epiphany approximately coincided with his conversion to Orthodoxy.[8] Mironov made his first literary steps as a member of the *Khelenukty*.[9] Although Christianity

[6] Krivulin recalls how his perception of poetic language changed for ever while he was reading Evgenii Baratynskii on 24 July 1970, in '"Poeziia—eto razgovor samogo iazyka": interv'iu s V. Kulakovym', *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 14 (1995), 223–33 (p. 226). This reading opened to him a realm in which language reigned supreme as a vehicle of communication transcending time and space. However, this account was given twenty-five years after the event, and not only does the episode appear highly stylized, but it also recalls a very similar account by Joseph Brodsky of his reading of Auden (S. Volkov, *Dialogi s Iosifom Brodskim: literaturnye biografii* (Moscow: Nezavisimaia gazeta, 1998), p. 159). Thus Krivulin's account of the life-changing insight afforded by this moment should be assessed with the necessary degree of critical distance.

[7] After Krivulin's death in 2001 his widow, Ol'ga Kushlina, confirmed both the date and the claim that Krivulin destroyed his previous work in her preface to a selection of his poems from the 1970s to 2000, which Krivulin himself had compiled shortly before his death and which were published in *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 52 (2001), 255–70 (Kushlina's preface p. 255). Simultaneously his friend Tat'iana Bukovskaia published a substantial selection of his early poetry from the 1960s, accompanied by three short articles, in *Akt—Literaturnyi samizdat*, 3 (2001), an issue that is entirely dedicated to Krivulin. The author of one article, signing himself V.M., claims that Krivulin was fully formed as a poet well before 1970, thereby contradicting Krivulin himself. Krivulin had not included any of the poems published in *Akt* in his officially published collections in the 1980s and 1990s, which include *Stikhi* (Paris: Ritm, 1981) and *Obrashchenie* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1991). The earliest poem included in *Stikhi*, 2 vols (Leningrad and Paris: Beseda, 1988), is dated 1968.

[8] This claim is made in *Samizdat Leningrada*, pp. 229–30. Goricheva remembers that Krivulin was a practising Orthodox Christian before they were married in the early 1970s.

[9] The *Khelenukty* congregated at the *Malaia Sadovaia* café during the 1960s and wrote mostly absurd verse and plays on the spirit of OBERIU. For details see *Samizdat Leningrada*, pp. 461–62,

had its place in the poetic universe of this group, the almost obsessive use of Christian vocabulary and images became a visible feature of Mironov's work only in the early 1970s, when the *Khelenukty* as a group had ceased to exist.[10] Judging by the small output that was included in the 'posthumous' *Kniga Khelenuktizm*,[11] and the similarly small selection of poems from the years 1967–69 in the volume *Izbrannoe*,[12] Mironov's main preoccupation before 1970 was formal experiment, not religious imagery.

Neither Krivulin nor Mironov produced any openly devotional poems. The religious imagery they use consistently relates to the creative act of writing, in particular the writing of poetry. For both Krivulin and Mironov, the only stable point of reference and, as it seems, anchor for theological ideas in a literature deemed to have a spiritual basis was literary creativity itself.[13] Both worked with a concept of the literary word that was unreliable and unstable, rendering their allusions to God and religious statements into playful images without any claim to substantial theological content. And yet they carry a religious message—one that is contained less in a philosophical interpretation than in the expression of the tremendous joy, not least joy in one's own creativity, that can be experienced in the present moment. And of course there is also the affirmation of another reality beyond the visible—no matter how much Krivulin and Mironov distort religious language and invalidate Christian tenets, they cannot stop using these images and thereby strengthen their connotations.

Poetry as a Religious Exercise

For Krivulin, religious and literary exaltation were inextricably entwined, with poetic creativity constituting a quasi-religious experience in its own right. His most succinct definition of poetic creativity in given in the epigraph to the article 'Dvadtsat' let noveishei russkoi poezii' ('Twenty years of modern Russian poetry'), his bold attempt at contextualizing and conceptualizing unofficial poetry: 'Поэзия—как приобщение к святости. | Прошел год—и человека

and especially Stanislav Savitskii, 'Khelenukty v teatre povsednevnosti. Leningrad. Vtoraia polovina 60-kh godov', *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 30 (1998), 210–59.

[10] Among the regulars at the *Malaia Sadovaia* café were the brothers Vadim and Sergei Tanchik, the centre of a group of new Christians who gathered in the brothers' room for meetings and even baptisms, carried out by a priest from the catacomb church. It is conceivable that Mironov, who was close friends with Sergei Tanchik, converted to Orthodoxy during this time, but I have been unable to find confirmation of this.

[11] Vladimir Erl', *Kniga Khelenuktizm: stikhi, dramagedii, polemika* (St Petersburg: Prizma_15, 1993).

[12] A. Mironov, *Izbrannoe: stikhotvoreniia i poemy* (St Petersburg: INAPRESS, 2002).

[13] Compare Mironov's 'Вне языка не помышляй и жить | пусть даже почва столь косноязычна' ('Don't even think of living outside language | even if the soil is so inarticulate'), p. 249.

не узнать' ('Poetry is like an introduction to holiness. | A year passes, and you don't recognize the man any more').[14]

'Vechera pod Kreshchen′e' ('The Evenings before Epiphany') (1973), a poem in which we find the poet 'в ожидании чуда' ('expecting a miracle'), is also dependent on an implicit association between verbal creation and religious exaltation. The poet is praying, but it is not pure religious insight he is thirsting for. Instead he craves words, experiencing his own silence as a kind of sin ('Бессловесность бессовестна' ('Inarticulacy is shameless')) and thereby explicitly identifying poetic speech and religious experience, or insight. His initial demand for religious and verbal power unfulfilled ('Ниспошли пар пророческой речи!' ('Grant me the steam of prophetic speech!')), the poet quickly becomes more humble and his demands more modest: '[Д]ай мне хоть бормотанье!' ('Then give me at least a mutter!')[15] One can say that Krivulin's poetry, with its many layers of religious allusions, none of which is ever elucidated satisfactorily, *is* in some sense the 'mutter' for which he is pleading.

As in the example given above, Krivulin's treatment of biblical motifs is robustly non-canonical. References to the Bible are often so concealed within a web of cross-references that they would not be apparent without the poems' titles. The first volume of his *Stikhi* begins with two poems called 'Voskresen′e' ('Resurrection'), dated 1971, which refer to the cultural and spiritual awakening of the underground poets rather than to eternal life:

> да существуешь ли? не призрак ли? На лица
> воскресный сон сошел
> [. . .]
> не время ли проститься
> с подпольем помыслов своих?
>
> (p. 8)

Do you exist at all? Aren't you just a spectre? A Sunday dream | descends on the faces | [. . .] | isn't it time to take leave | of the underground of one's own thoughts?

Krivulin's poetry demonstrates a consistent association between religious motifs and writing. Light is thrown on this association if we consider it within the framework of Krivulin's engagement with the Russian classical poetic tradition.[16] A central device he used to link religion and writing was the 'resurrection' of elements of the philosophy of the Logos, the idea of the (literary) word as a creative and ultimately divine entity, modelled on

[14] 'Dvadtsat′ let noveishei russkoi poezii', *Severnaia pochta* [samizdat], 1/2 (1979).

[15] V. Krivulin, *Stikhi*, 2 vols (Leningrad and Paris: Beseda, 1988), I, 95. All further quotations from Krivulin's poems are from the first volume of this edition, and references will be given as page numbers.

[16] Krivulin's work testifies to his great erudition and shows evidence of an intertextual dialogue with, among others, Aleksandr Pushkin, Fedor Tiutchev, Blok, Mandel′shtam, and Brodsky.

the New Testament image of Jesus Christ as God's Word made flesh. This metaphysical-mystical understanding of the word originates in the aesthetics of Romanticism[17] and found its apotheosis in the early twentieth-century modernists' veneration of the literary word as something that was capable of building and changing the world owing to its common nature with Logos.[18] The poem 'Ne pleniaisia' ('Don't be fascinated') alludes to this concept. The word is personified and personalized; it is for the sake of the Word, rather than of Christ, that it is worth enduring persecution in the world:

> Только Слово
> желая, не славы
> не жалей о железах тюрьмы.
> (p. 9)

Desire only the Word | rather than glory | do not regret the fetters of prison.

That Krivulin is consciously invoking Logos here can be seen from his reference to the Word ('Slovo') with a capital letter. This Word is both divine—the One for whose sake it is worth suffering repression—and emphatically literary, drawing attention to itself through the intense sound-painting effects created by the assonance of -zh, -s, and -l sounds. The choice of words as least as much for their sound as for their meaning was characteristic of Krivulin's poetry in the early 1970s; he frequently used this device to a degree at which layers of internal rhyme and assonance make the line cumbersome.[19] Here, however, it has the effect of affirming literature as a religion of its own, and

[17] For a comprehensive account of the cult of Logos, its origin, and its effects on early twentieth-century Russian literature and culture, see Thomas Seifrid, *The Word Made Self: Russian Writings on Language, 1860–1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[18] This idea, partly suggested in the writings of Aleksandr Potebnia, Vladimir Solov′ev, and Sergei Trubetskoi (*Uchenie o Logose v ego istorii*, 1900), was embraced and developed by many early twentieth-century writers, including Blok, Belyi, Konstantin Bal′mont, Nikolai Gumilev, Mandel′shtam, Velimir Khlebnikov, and others. Belyi went furthest in identifying the literary word with the divine word of the Gospel, for example '[U]sing the language of religion, creativity leads us to epiphany, the world Logos takes on a human Face [. . .]. And because of this we say, defining theurgy from the standpoint of metaphysics, that the task [of theurgy] is to show metaphysical unity in the human image (the Face), to show the word (principle) in the flesh (in the content of our activity); in figurative language this means: to turn the Word into Flesh. This is how the apostle talks about the same thing: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"' (A. Belyi, 'Emblematika smysla', in *Simvolizm*, pp. 49–143 (p. 94)). Compare also Mandel′shtam's personalization of the literary word in his essays *Slovo i kul′tura* (1921) and *O prirode slova* (1922), in which the word assumes anthropomorphic qualities, as the Psyche of Greek mythology in the first essay or 'active flesh that is resolved into an event' (Mandel′shtam, *Sochineniia*, II, 176).

[19] Compare 'на лица | воскресный сон сошел, и в сонме их | узнаешь ли свое' ('And a Sunday dream | descended on the faces, will you recognize your own | in their multitude?') ('Voskresen′e' ('Resurrection'), p. 8); 'в казенной жизни—в ожиданьи казни' ('in official life—awaiting execution') ('Серебристых сумерек река, тускнея' ('The river of silver twilight, waning'), p. 35); 'И убожество стиля, и убежище в каждом дворе' ('And squalor of style, and asylum in every courtyard') (p. 50).

the unofficial poets are likened to martyrs who are willing to go to prison for their faith—a hyperbolic statement, as purely literary activities by this time rarely resulted in severe reprisals.

The excerpt below is taken from 'Gorodskaia progulka' ('A stroll in the city'), which is dedicated to Krivulin's idol, the nineteenth-century poet Evgenii Baratynskii, referred to here using the old-fashioned spelling of his name as 'Boratynskii':

> И он ответил, что могильныя плиты
> совсем не тяжело откинуть покрывало
> совсем не тяжело восстать из немоты
> кто был зерном, тому и слова мало.
> [. . .]
> Да, Боратынский, ты живешь. Твоя стезя
> иная слову, иглами шевелит.
>
> (p. 9)

And he answered that the cover of the gravestone | was not at all hard to throw off | it was not at all hard to rise from muteness | for him who used to be seed, a word is not enough | [. . .] | Yes, Boratynskii, you are alive. | Your path is different from the word, it stirs like needles.

The theme of overcoming silence, literally 'to rise from muteness', is associated with the biblical teaching about the Resurrection by the image of the stone that was used to close the tomb containing the body of Jesus. At the same time it is presented in a context that is explicitly related to language and the Russian poetic tradition, pointing to the situation of the unofficial poets who were attempting to counter the stylistic blandness of official Soviet culture.[20] Krivulin habitually tied images that engage with the unofficial poet and poetry to religious imagery, but he did so without ever establishing a system of correspondences that would give the reader reliable access to the meaning of the images. Thus the critical reader, faced with the sheer abundance of such hidden-yet-visible allusions, will sooner or later ask the question of how exactly religious and literary pursuits are linked, and what Krivulin's criteria for a 'sacred text' are—in other words, what the poet had in mind when he called poetry 'communion with holiness'.[21] There is a non-committedness inherent to his writing that makes any such criteria extremely hard to pinpoint; Krivulin rejected as tainted or clichéd the language by which the Church—or classical literature—defined a 'sacred' text. And yet his allusions to these traditions indicate that the notion of the 'sacred text' was one of his main preoccupations, with an ironic playfulness providing the contemporary framework within which the quest for 'sacred' literary language took place.

[20] Another such poem is 'Inok' (p. 61), in which the poet is likened to a hermit.
[21] See the text at n. 14 above.

Aleksandr Mironov was loosely associated with Krivulin's circle. Comparing his approach with that of Krivulin, we immediately notice a number of key differences. Krivulin's main concern was the renewal of poetic language on the basis of a re-established connection to the pre-revolutionary literary heritage. Mironov was, in a sense, much less 'academic', focusing instead on the process of writing itself as a chaotic, spontaneous, and spiritually invigorating activity. But he, too, turned the composition of poetry into a quasi-religious practice based on an aestheticized religiosity that fed on an obsession with writing. Moreover, Mironov's infatuation with the concept of the literary word as Logos confirms his place among the 'word-worshippers' of the 1970s, and his image of the word is frequently laced with references to Russian religious philosophy or Silver Age (mostly Symbolist) concepts. However, these references remained for the most part superficial and were used in order to establish a certain context or, just as importantly, for the sake of provocation. Mironov was a master in harnessing the rich connotations of the Logos-philosophy, religious and literary, as something that invited transgression, an aspect that will be discussed below.

In a poem of 1972 Mironov likened the poet to a book, possibly even the Bible: Открывая себя наугад, | я помыслю Грядущее слово ('Opening myself at random | I think about the Coming word').[22] These lines lead the reader into an explicitly Christian context: subsequent images feature references to the Garden of Eden (or perhaps Gethsemane), Job, Paradise, new life (given in Italian, *vita nuova*, as both a suitable rhyme for 'slovo', the word, and a possible allusion to Dante's famous work of the same name), and the inner necessity of prayer ('а душа без молитвы—мертва' ('but a soul without prayer is dead'). These references strengthen the association in the lines quoted above between the 'Coming word' and Christ (the kingdom of God, the Second Coming).[23] At the same time, the pensive wait for the coming word reminds the reader of a poet who is waiting for inspiration. Thus Mironov, through the image of the book, creates an explicit analogy between the Bible and writing, as well as between poetic inspiration and Christian revelation.

The connotation of the Logos-motif Mironov most heavily relied on is that of the Word-made-flesh, i.e. the eternal creative word of God made incarnate, material, and present in time in the person of Jesus Christ. Christian tradition has been ambivalent about the physical aspects of human existence, sex, and the body. On the one hand, Jesus Christ is understood to have sanctified mat-

[22] A. Mironov, 'Otkryvaia sebya naugad' ('Opening myself at random'), *Izbrannoe: stikhotvoreniia i poemy* (St Petersburg: INAPRESS, 2002), p. 68. All further quotations from Mironov's poems are from this edition, and references will be given as page numbers.

[23] In his 1917 'poem on sound', *Glossolaliia*, Andrei Belyi wrote about the second coming—of the Word: 'and we know: the second coming of the Word will happen' (A. Belyi, *Glossolaliia: poema o zvuke* (1917/1922) (Tomsk: Vodolei, 1994), p. 89).

ter and the body by taking on human form. The Old Testament includes the Song of Songs, a love poem that constitutes a sublime hymn of praise to human sensuality. However, the Church has tended to sublimate the physical aspects of the text, presenting it as a metaphor for the relationship between Christ, in the figure of the bridegroom, and the Church as his bride. Church culture, both Eastern and Western, has traditionally taken a hostile stance against the open expression of sensuality and sexuality, in particular extramarital sexuality. Soviet culture was an unlikely ally in this respect. Mention of sex was banned in officially sanctioned artworks, as was the positive representation of religion. Unlike the lofty, allegorical Song of Songs or medieval mystical poetry such as the work of St John of the Cross, Mironov's work brought out the specifically 'carnal' aspect of the theological metaphor of the Word-made-flesh. Mironov literalized this image, often, as we shall see, by dwelling on the baser aspect of sexual love or by invoking images of actual cannibalism in relation to the Eucharist.[24] Thus he created a triangle of reference between writing, the Christian religion, and sexual/carnal imagery. The association of religion and barely concealed sensuality poses a challenge to the idea of the 'sacred text'. On one level this association can be understood as a nod to the decadent current within early Symbolism.[25] But I hope also to demonstrate that this kind of provocation was essential to Mironov's project of redefining the 'sacred' text, cast in the role of a liberating force.

A striking example of a semantic connection between the sexual imagery created by the literalized metaphor of the Word-made-flesh and the notion of the poet setting down words is the poem 'Na beregu ozera: chetki' ('By the lake: rosary'). The final stanza reads:

> Но кто обрящет золотую нить—
> по узелкам прочтет благое слово
> о том, как Деву-Слово голубить
> у Голубя за пазухой, и снова—
> и узелок, и Слово повторить.
> (p. 163)

But he who finds the golden thread | will read the good news along the knots | about how to caress the Virgin-Word | in the bosom of the Dove, and once again | a knot, and the repetition of the Word.

We notice that three words are capitalized: Virgin, Word, and Dove. Thus

[24] To give a single example: 'И вновь съедобный наш Господь | в нас Слово сеет | но слово обретает плоть | и плоть радеет' ('And once again our edible Lord | sows the word in us | but the word takes on flesh | and the flesh carries out rituals') ('Kak bestelesny i prosty', pp. 9–10).

[25] In particular, the 'New Religious Consciousness' propagated by Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, Nikolai Berdiaev, and Vasilii Rozanov, including the utopian project of the 'Church of the Third Sacrament' that was based on the redemptive qualities of *pol*, human sexuality. Some relevant texts have recently been republished in N. Berdiaev, *'Eros i lichnost'': filosofiia pola i liubvi* (St Petersburg: Azbuka-klassika, 2007).

Mironov, unconventionally, equates the Word with the Virgin rather than with Christ. The Dove is a familiar symbol of the Holy Spirit. The etymology of the Russian verb 'to caress'—*golubit'*—establishes a tension between the Dove—*Golub*—and the Virgin-Word as the recipient of the caress. In order to disentangle the thicket of references and cross-references let us recall a few concepts propagated by the early twentieth-century religious philosophers. The 'Virgin-Word' combines allusions to Vladimir Solov'ev's philosophy of Sophia, the wisdom of God conceived as the Eternal Feminine (the Logos in the world as feminine principle),[26] with elements of Sergii Bulgakov's thought, who identified the Eternal Feminine with the Mother of God. The reference to a caress in this context brings to mind Berdiaev's provocative crossing of the Virgin with the pagan goddess of carnal love, Aphrodite, when he speaks of 'heavenly Aphrodite',[27] using the adjective 'heavenly' that is normally reserved for Mary.

Thus the question arises of whether this poem, with its vividly sensual imagery that turns the Virgin Mary into the object of a caress, rather than respectful veneration, is an instance of sophisticated, potentially subversive theological speculation, or a bewildering array of allusions that fail to come together. I would argue that it is neither. The missing key to the imagery, complementing the religious and sensual references, is the act of writing. The last line—another knot, and the repetition of the word—harks back to a word in the title, 'rosary'. A rosary is used in order to recite the Hail Mary, or rather, many Hail Marys in a row. Each time the believer lets a bead (or, in the Orthodox tradition, a knot) pass through his hands, he repeats the prayer. The last line clearly refers to this action, but the 'repetition of words' also evokes the poet at work, especially when we bear in mind that *uzelok* denotes not only a knot, but also a small bundle, i.e. an object in which separate elements are joined together.

Thus the pleasantly rhyming *Deva-Slovo* alludes not only to the act of praying, but also to the composition of poetry, i.e. the repetitive act of stringing words together. The poetic word, presented as it is within the referential framework of prayer and the Word-made-flesh, is invested here with distinctly religious properties. It may seem that we are being prompted to understand the composition of poetry as something akin to incarnation. Precisely this is

[26] In Gnosticism, Sophia is the emanation of divine wisdom. Solov'ev, who was obsessed with the idea of utopian all-unity brought about by the spiritual union of the male and female principles, conceived of Logos (the Word; Christ) and Sophia as the two aspects of the divine Absolute (see *Chteniia o Bogochelovechestve*, vol. VII (Moscow: Ast, 2007), p. 158). See also Judith Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[27] N. Berdiaev, 'O novom religioznom soznanii', in *Sub specie aeternitatis* (Moscow: Kanon+, 2002), pp. 378–418 (p. 381).

suggested in 'Puteshestvie' ('The journey'), where the soul is called upon to 'create words':

> Душе моя, что спишь? Воспрянь, оденься,
> привыкни к первозданному труду
> творенья слов . . .
>
> (p. 170)[28]

My soul, why are you asleep? Arise from sleep, get dressed | get used to the primordial task | of word creation . . .

The 'primordial task of creation' is a prime example of the identification of poetry with religion, especially since the expression 'tvoren′ie slov' contains a barely veiled reference to the Russian word for poetry, *stikhotvorenie*. The series of imperatives reminds the reader of the conclusion of Pushkin's 'Prorok' ('The prophet'), his famous work about the poet as an outcast who creates poetry on divine orders. Mironov thus continues to weave his web of literary references.

Mironov often alienates religious motifs from their usual context by tying them to motifs that are construed as semantically opposed, such as sexual ecstasy (this will be discussed in more detail below). At the same time, all these motifs hinge on the notion of writing. Thus he forces the reader to ask himself how these motifs evoke the sacred and what exactly it is they refer to. In this sense the device fulfils the same function as Krivulin's veiled, abortive use of biblical topics.

Yet Mironov's use of the Word-made-flesh foreshadows another feature of his literary world, and, to a lesser degree, that of Krivulin, which will be discussed further below: while the original meaning of the Word-made-flesh is active and creative, Mironov's word has lost this innate power. It *repeats* itself, mocking the world, creating nothing and communicating nothing. This in turn has a tremendous impact on the notion of sacred language, which loses any referential qualities it may have had.

The Powerless Prophet

By the 1970s the traditions relating to 'sacred' or 'creative' language had been severely undermined, so that they could no longer be invoked in an unproblematic way in order to generate meaning. This applied to the liturgical word that supposedly turns bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ as well as to various literary concepts, i.e. the Symbolist understanding of the

[28] This poem contains multiple allusions to modernist poets, including T. S. Eliot ('Ваш труп, Ти Эс, уже созрел, наверно, | над Темзой, где так страшно воскресать?' ('Your corpse, T. S., had probably matured | above the Thames, where it is so terrible to rise from the dead?')), André Breton, and Anna Akhmatova.

word as a bridge to the world beyond and the Futurists' intention to use the word as a building block for the new society. And with these literary concepts vanished the modernist pathos that elevated the poet to mythic heights and fused his role with that of the priest or prophet. We find variations on the motif of the poet-prophet in the work of most of the great poets of the Russian tradition, from Pushkin's prototypical Prophet ('Prorok', 1826) to Blok's 'Son of Harmony', as presented in his 1921 essay 'O naznachenii poeta' ('On the calling of the poet'), Akhmatova's casting herself as the voice of her people in 'Rekviem', or the cult of Brodsky as the last heir to the Russian classical tradition. By the 1970s this motif—including the version in which the poet-prophet is despised and ostracized, as epitomized in Lermontov's 1841 version of 'Prorok' ('The prophet')—had become a somewhat tired cliché that had to be treated with ironic distance in order for some of its original power to shine. Krivulin showed extraordinary inventiveness when he turned the motif of the poet-prophet, who is deprived of all real power through being a child of his time, into the cornerstone of his cult of the unofficial poet.[29]

Krivulin frequently spoke about 'the Poet' as a generic figure rather than an individual ('Smert' poeta' ('The death of the poet'), 'Dom poeta' ('The house of the poet')). At first sight, his poet bears close resemblance to the modernist prototype as found, for example, in the work of Blok and Tsvetaeva. However, Krivulin's Poet—or rather, the one carrying this inspiration in the 1970s—has lost all his power. He is nameless,[30] possibly because his time—a time which, as the use of winter imagery suggests, is near to death—has forgotten his name altogether, as in the poem 'Priblizhenie litsa' ('A face draws near'):

> все имена сошлись. И в семени одном
> уже бушует лес, уже мертвеет осень.
> [. . .]
> Он безымян. Его живая речь
> окружена зимою.
>
> (p. 63)

all names came together. And in a single seed | the wood already rages, autumn already grows cold | [. . .] | He has no name. His live speech | is surrounded by winter.

This awareness of something that can be called cultural anaemia permeates Krivulin's work. The restrictive and uniform environment of Soviet official culture did not nurture poets pursuing the path Krivulin and his circle had chosen, and the unofficial cultural sphere, vibrant as it was, could not compare to the cultural ferment of the Silver Age. This is often expressed through

[29] Krivulin produced his own, eponymous version of 'Prorok' (p. 173), closely engaging with Pushkin's text. Discussing this poem, or indeed the link between Pushkin and Krivulin and/or Mironov, is beyond the scope of this article.

[30] Even more poignantly, Krivulin's poet has no face: 'жалко | не лицо. Пустота' ('Pitiful | not a face. Emptiness') ('Smert' poeta', p. 25).

images that tell of a half-ironic, half-serious inferiority complex towards the culture of high modernism during the Silver Age. In the poem 'Deti polukul′tury' ('Children of half-culture') this inferiority complex is expressed through the image of the poet and his contemporaries as children, denouncing the self-referential underground culture of which they are part as not fully fledged: 'Дети полукультуры, | с улыбкой живем полудетской' ('Children of half-culture, | we live with a half-childish smile', p. 44).[31] The 'smiling children' he invokes are playing (that is, engaging in their literary pursuits) inside something that is 'совсем не жилье, но сплошная забава' ('not a dwelling at all, but pure child's play'). Exaltation and wonder, mixed with a good degree of self-deprecation, thus take the place of a solid dwelling in the here and now. The underground emerges as a transitory place characterized by the absence of a reliable referential framework. However, it would be unwise to take Krivulin's frequent references to cultural inferiority at face value.

We may remember the rather confident likening of unofficial poets to martyrs in the quotation from 'Ne pleniaisia', given above, and indeed, Krivulin promoted a defiant image of the unofficial poet, a marginal figure, materially destitute and a social misfit, whose contempt for everything to do with material comfort and total commitment to literature alone mark him as the 'chosen one' among all those who preferred not to conform to the prescriptive Soviet way of life. The unofficial poets were no long-suffering ascetics, but combined their pursuit of literary heights with a bohemian lifestyle that included liberal use of drink and sexual promiscuity and became the subject of poetry. In 'P′iu vino arkhaizmov′ ('I drink the wine of archaisms', p. 108) the poet exclaims: 'Кто сказал: катакомбы? | В пивные бредем и аптеки!' ('Who said: catacombs? | We drag ourselves to beer bars, pharmacies!'). A presumptuous analogy between this lifestyle, its 'spirit' portrayed as capable of saving poetic language, and the asceticism of the early Christians, who worshipped in catacombs and spread the 'light' of their faith, highlights a profoundly ironic attitude to the role of the poet and the significance of literature that was the trademark sign of the cult of the unofficial poet ('Дух культуры подпольной, как раннеапостольский свет | брезжит в окнах' ('The spirit of underground culture, like the light of the early apostles | dawns in the windows')

The 'inferiority complex', then, belonged to the repertoire of ironic stylizations Krivulin habitually employed; this does not imply he was any less

[31] The poem triggers a range of associations, including Merezhkovskii's 'Deti nochi' ('Children of the night', 1893) and Blok's 1914 poem 'Rozhdennye v goda glukhie' ('Born in the close, unechoing years'), which thematizes the fate of the generation of writers born during the critical years of the Russian empire: 'Мы дети страшных лет России' ('We are the children of Russia's terrible years'). At the same time Krivulin seems to have internalized Blok's 1921 reproach to the Acmeists: 'Без божества, без вдохновенья' ('Without godhead, without inspiration'), identifying a similar pattern of alienation in 1970s unofficial culture.

convinced in his abilities and/or mission as a Russian poet. However, the sheer frequency of references to cultural inferiority implies that the topic was important after all and not just a literary trope. Indeed, many of Krivulin's poems deal with cultural poverty's impact on art.[32] Ultimately, then, Krivulin's poet is neither Blok's 'Son of Harmony' who listens to the 'sounds' of a world beyond our own and translates transcendent harmony into a language accessible to his fellow humans, nor Tsvetaeva's 'Orpheus', the spirit of poetry become incarnate in a particular individual. In the Soviet environment of the late twentieth century the only task left to the poet is to protect the impoverished scraps of (literary) language that have survived, as evident in 'Nimfa rechi' ('The nymph of speech'):

> С бедным словарем
> ты более всего нуждаешься в защите.
> [. . .]
> О нищете, о нише, о пробеле
> твердит само отсутствие.
>
> (p. 182)

With your poor lexicon | you need protection more than anything else | [. . .] | the absence itself | reiterates the poverty, the recess, the gap.

Krivulin's musings on the role of the poet take us right into one of his central and comfortingly irresolvable paradoxes: the poet—and Krivulin's poet is always the unofficial poet—was by definition existing at the margins of society and literature. Yet this marginal position offered fertile ground for the renewal of poetic language. And indeed the vitality of Leningrad unofficial culture, which shaped several figures that we now associate with late twentieth-century Russian poetry, proved Krivulin's contention correct.[33]

In Mironov's work the figure of the poet is not as ubiquitous; the process of writing itself is foregrounded instead. However, when the poet appears, he

[32] Doubt in the creative power of his poetry, induced by the absence of a framework for this art in the here and now, is expressed in 'To skuchennost', to skuka' ('Overcrowding, then longing'): 'И если выпал звук—изменится ль картина | не мира даже—нашего мирка? | [. . .] | И как бы не назвали— | все именем чужим, все в спину, все вослед . . .' (And if a sound came out—would the image change | not even of the world, but our little world? | [. . .] | And no matter what we call it | it is always by a stranger's name, always backwards, always behind . . .') (p. 91).

[33] From Krivulin's original circle, Elena Shvarts (1948–2010) and Sergei Stratanovskii (b. 1944) went on to have significant poetic careers. Krivulin's own poetry features in many anthologies, including two recent bilingual Russian–English ones: *In the Grip of Strange Thoughts: Russian Poetry in a New Era*, ed. by J. Kates and Mikhail Aizenberg (London: Bloodaxe, 1998) (contains work by Stratanovskii, Shvarts, Krivulin, and Ol'ga Sedakova, a Moscow-based poet and scholar with close ties to the Krivulin circle, who published some of her poetry in the journal '*37*', No. 10), and *Contemporary Russian Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. by Evgeny Bunimovich and J. Kates (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008) (features work by Shvarts and Sedakova). The new anthology *Russkie stikhi 1950–2000 godov: antologiia (pervoe priblizhenie)*, 2 vols, ed. by I. Akhmet'ev, G. Lukomnikov, V. Orlov, and A. Uritskii (Moscow: Letnii sad, 2010), features a large number of poets from the unofficial sphere.

retains distinct features of the classical image, distorted in accordance with Mironov's principle of clashing opposing registers. A prime example of this is 'Priroda delaet poetom' ('Nature makes you a poet'). The first line invokes the Romantic myth of the poet as a person with a special calling, a prophet and an outsider: 'Природа делает поэтом | когда в душе у вас кристалл' ('Nature makes you a poet | when there is a crystal in your soul'). And Mironov's poet is suffering just like Pushkin's hero, his canonical predecessor: 'Кусает грудь ему химера | И некому ему помочь' ('A chimera is tearing at his chest | And there is no one to help him.'). At this point Mironov abruptly abandons the myth, though, introducing a God who is not a terrible, almighty inspiration, but a bystander who is totally indifferent towards the poet; at the same time the poet is described in ever more ironic terms: 'Один лишь Бог взирает где-то | [. . .] | Но он плюется на поэта | который жарче утюга' ('God alone is gazing somewhere | [. . .] | But he doesn't give a damn about the poet | who is hotter than an iron'). Later the reader understands that the poet's torment is not caused by creative frustration alone, but first and foremost by frustrated carnal desires—he is hankering after food and, more importantly, sex:

Поэт в отчаяньи трепещет
Ему соблазном—колбаса
Ему химера—дева блещет
Распоясав пояса.

The poet trembles in despair | he is tempted by a sausage | a girl flashes like a chimera | taking off her garters.

In the final stanza the poet proceeds to have sex—he screams and moans with lust, with the result that he is finally able to write:

И жуток крик его полночный
Как будто стонут петухи
Но уж теперь-то он воочью
напишет пальцами стихи
(p. 44)

His midnight cry is terrible | as if cockerels were moaning | but now he is clearly | writing verse with his fingers'.

But in this context, the line 'he is writing verse with his fingers' is deliberately ambiguous, conflating as it does sexual caresses and the act of writing. This poem is an excellent example of Mironov's playful attitude to literary tradition and its key images, executed through an irreverent, flippant use of religious imagery in combination with open sexual references. In metre, as well as in the topic of the poet as a banal being, 'Priroda delaet poetom' exhibits certain distinctive parallels to Pushkin's 'Poet' (1827), which represents the poet as 'weak-spirited' outside his moments of inspiration. But Pushkin's poet, even

in his banal state, is never ridiculous, and the divine imperative to create, in the second half of the poem, transforms him from mere mortal into an elevated, noble, and solitary being. The transformation of ordinary man to poet by means of a sexual encounter at the end of 'Priroda delaet poetom' is ambivalent at best; it is not clear whether the poet writes or caresses or both. At the same time, the image is a particularly clear example of Mironov's identification of sexual ecstasy and literary creation, with religious imagery playing a secondary, if still prominent, role.

Mironov thus invokes constituent elements of a readily recognizable cultural myth as the building blocks of his poetic universe, but not without first subjecting them to ironic inflection. Unlike Krivulin's allusions to the myth of the poet and the related logocentric world-view, Mironov's references lack the transparent quality that makes Krivulin's allusion resemble distorted mirror images of Silver Age motifs. For Mironov, one may conclude, the remnants of the logocentric world-view are even further atrophied than for his fellow poet. As a result, his concept of the word is even more uncertain and vulnerable than Krivulin's ephemeral shadows and mirrors, as will become evident from the discussion below.

The Word-Made-Flesh as Non-Corporeal

The literary and historical developments of the twentieth century eroded the referential certainties of literary language. As one consequence, generating and communicating meaning by means of the literary word is no longer straightforward. And once again it is the Logos-motif that helps us appreciate poems in which writers make statements to this effect. The 'corporeality' of the Word-made-flesh, or rather, the lack thereof, is used by both poets as a metaphor for the unstable nature of the word, and, ultimately, of poetry.

'P′iu vino arkhaizmov', Krivulin's great hymn to the Logos and the Silver Age, is all about poetic language. The 'archaisms' referred to in the title are archaisms in the literal sense, i.e. liturgical and Old Slavonic terms, but they also denote the great poetic tradition of the past. This tradition is presented as both intoxicating, fuelling the creative pathos of the unofficial poets, and a source of new life for literary language, trapped as it is in the monotony of Soviet culture. Yet the poetic word of Krivulin's day is highly vulnerable, secondary to the literary word of the past, and subject to shifts in shape:

> Пью вино архаизмов. О солнце, горевшем когда-то,
> говорит, заплетаясь, и бредит язык.
> [. . .]
> Гибнет голос, живет отголосок

[. . .]
он дымится на мокром помосте средь досок
(p. 108)

I drink the wine of archaisms. The tongue, thickly, deliriously | speaks of the sun that used to burn some time ago | [. . .] | The voice dies, the echo lives on | [. . .] | it smokes on the wet wooden stage between the planks.

In practical terms we see this frailty of the word in the ironic, paradoxical, self-deprecating attitude Krivulin displays within and towards his own work. Insecure and limited to mirages and allusions instead of fully fledged images, the poet's voice is a mere echo. The creations of this after-voice are themselves winding and fleeting, like smoke. Indeed, smoke is another metaphor Krivulin routinely employs to highlight the transitory nature of poetry, as in 'O khudozhnike vspomniu' ('I remember the artist'), where we read about 'Призрак творчество. Облачко пара' ('A spectre of creativity. A little cloud of steam', p. 114). While Tsvetaeva, quoting Blok, felt confident enough to exclaim 'The secret ardour means just that—to live', Krivulin, in a possible allusion to her poem, was much more modest about his own role:

(я только оболочка
для жара тайного!) и слушать
[. . .] как тает снег, потеплевает почва.
(p. 63)[34]

(I am just shell | for the secret ardour!) and to listen | [. . .] how the snow melts, how the soil grows warm.

The comparison of the word to smoke is central to 'Obrashchenie', which raises the important question of the communicability or dialogic potential of a poetry based on a word that has no permanent meaning. Not surprisingly, we cannot rely on the echo-poet to provide a satisfactory answer.

The title 'Obrashchenie' is itself ambivalent, with its suggestions of both (religious) conversion and appeal or address. Thus, although the poem is ostensibly all about words and talking, it also carries religious overtones. The opening lines reveal poetry itself to be the subject and identify the potential for communication as the most important feature of verse. But, ironically, the poem has no identifiable addressee in this world. On the contrary, the 'smoke' of poetic words is comprehensible only to that which by definition can neither hear nor answer:

[34] Tsvetaeva's statement is from the essay 'Pushkin i Pugachev' (1937). She is referring to Blok's 'O, net! ne raskolduesh' serdtsa ty . . .' (1913): 'Ты проклянешь, в мученьях невозможных, | Всю жизнь за то, что некого любить! | Но есть ответ в моих стихах тревожных: | Их тайный жар тебе поможет жить. | Тайный жар и есть—жить' ('You curse, in impossible torment | all life because there is no one to love! | But there is an answer in my perturbed verse: | Its secret ardour will help you live. The secret ardour means just that—to live').

все обращения в стихах текут как дымы
сквозь темные дома и скверы и мосты . . .
[. . .]
но слушатель незримый
одно живое ухо пустоты

(p. 72)

in verse all addresses flow like fumes | through dark houses, public gardens, bridges | [. . .] | but the invisible listener | only the living ear of the void

That the void should have a 'living ear' is a paradox of the kind that features frequently in Krivulin's work. The void is by definition vacant and silent; the moment words resound in it, the void is no longer void. The use of the word *pustota* also negates the religious undertone of the 'living ear' that listens to the words uttered into nothingness. If the 'living ear' did not belong to the void, it could be read as meaning that the poet, although ignored by the world, is talking to a higher authority, probably God, a frequent epithet for whom is *nezrimyi* (invisible). But as they stand these lines convey deep weariness undercut by irony, evident in the juxtaposition of a mundane Petersburg scene, where words waft through the night like 'smoke', and the abortive appeal to a higher authority. This is compounded when Krivulin advocates talking for the sake of talking:

О чем—неважно—говорить, но говоренье
стихов лишь к одному обращено
Кто сердце есть вещей и око и окно.

(p. 72)

to talk—no matter—of what but the talk | of verse is addressed on to the one | who is the heart of things and eye and window.

'Obrashchenie' toys with the possibility that poetry is only chasing after the wind. Yet even as Krivulin appears to advocate talking for its own sake, he backtracks and reverts to the image of a higher authority. This 'one' is heart and eye of all things and in him all things are united. The poem culminates in the line 'Он и дыханье примет как пятно' ('To Him, even breath is a stain'). This emphasis on the heightened sensitivity of 'the one' seems to cancel out the lines on indistinct talking, making the poem an excellent example of the shifting perspectives and images, dissolving before they have time to become fully formed, that dominate Krivulin's lexicon.[35]

We have to admit that Krivulin at least attempted to 'build' something with his words. Despite calling his own voice 'a mere echo', most of his images, however complex, are referential in the conventional sense. His 'attempts at

[35] 'Obrashchenie' is the title poem of Krivulin's first official collection in Russia, published in 1991. In this edition Krivulin emphasized the latent religious overtone of the imagery even more by capitalizing *Ukho* and *Odnomu*.

building', as well as their limits, are most obvious in those poems that reproduce recognizable features of Leningrad/St Petersburg, or at least urban space. One example is the poem 'Neopalimaia kupina' ('The burning bush'), an example of Krivulin's longer poems, in which the poet conjures up the image of a derelict and forgotten church before embarking on a discussion on the nature of art:

> Художник слеп [. . .]
> лишь бы наполнить собою пустые объемы
> [. . .]
> Перед [художником]—неопалимый куст
> и образ храма светел, как костер
> средь бела дня. Но храм пока что пуст.
> (p. 110)

The artist is blind [. . .] | if only he could fill the empty dimensions with himself | [. . .] | before [the artist] there is a burning bush | and the image of a church shone like a fire | in bright daylight. But the church is still empty.

The church has spaces the artist is trying to 'fill with himself'; it is described as 'still empty', the use of the word 'still' raising hopes for future good fortune. Thus art/poetry retains a definite creative potential, even one that is explicitly sacred, given that this poem stays within the familiar religious/biblical/allusive register. And yet the image fails to become concrete. The church, represented explicitly in a state of dereliction, is, moreover, rendered in a deliberately blurred and surreal fashion, an impression that is reinforced by the layout—the indentation of the stanzas devoted to art sets them off against the rest of the poem—the combination of different metres (iambic pentameter, anapaestic pentameter, mixed stanza of anapaestic trimeter and tetrameter), the heavy use of internal rhyme and other sound-play, and layers upon layers of contradictory metaphors and allusions. And this would not be Krivulin if he had not taken care to destabilize any fixed meaning the reader could potentially attach to the relation between artist and church. The high symbolic potential of the poem is immediately undercut by allusions to drunkenness and, at a stretch of the imagination, even the possibility that the speaker could have tried to set fire to the ruins of the church ('Шурк зажигаемой спички. | Боль обожженной руки' ('The rustle of a struck match | The pain of a burnt hand')).[36]

Mironov, on the other hand, denied his words even the last vestiges of the power to create—to build meaning in the conventional sense. And paradoxically, the device used to achieve this impression is the non-corporeality of the Word-made-flesh, which is at the same time hailed as 'carnal'. This non-

[36] Other 'architecture' poems written in the early 1970s include 'Ostrov Golodai' (p. 37), 'Obvodnyi kanal' (p. 38), 'V Ekaterinskom kanale' (p. 39), 'Kanal Griboedova' (p. 40), 'Nevskii mylovarennyi zavod' (p. 41), and 'Nikol'skii sobor' (p. 42).

corporeality, which undermines the word's religious authority, is the main point in the poem 'Prichastie' ('Communion', p. 72). The verbal constructions in this poem have the effect of a drawing by Escher of a spiral staircase that turns and displays fantastic archways; the awestruck onlooker knows perfectly well that he is the victim of an optical illusion, that the individual elements are not connected in any logical or structurally sound fashion. This is all the more poignant as the layout of the poem, in numbered unrhymed sentences that resemble slogans, is reminiscent of the Ten Commandments, or potentially Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses, but with firm emphasis on the word in place of God. In fact we can say that 'Prichastie' feasts on contradictions centred on the word: on the one hand Christ-the-Word-made-flesh is naturally at its centre ('Смысл—плоть слова' ('Meaning is the flesh of the word'); 'Дух—воскресение слова' ('Spirit is the resurrection of the word')), while at the same time its authority is under fire from all sides: words are referred to in the plural, as 'microbe-like' and 'mortal', which likens them to human beings. The final paradox ('Имеющему—прибавится, | У неимущего—отнимется' ('To the one who has more will be given | From the one who has nothing even that will be taken away')) seems to negate one of the essential teachings of Christianity, namely the statement that those who are the last in the world will be the first with God ('So the last will be first, and the first will be last', Matthew 20. 16). But in fact it constitutes a slightly altered quotation of a less well-known Gospel teaching: 'Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them' (Matthew 13. 12, also Mark 4. 25).

'Prichastie' is the last in a long series of poems which, while stressing the centrality of language, effectively state that language really communicates nothing because it has no material existence. Mikhail Epshtein has identified the denigration of language and logic as a device that points to a realm of silence behind the visible things.[37] If we accept this position, Mironov's art has renounced any claim to being a vehicle of philosophical insight, turning instead into something that has the power to show us another reality—a reality in which the laws of referentiality and logic do not hold and which can thus only be conceived 'negatively':

> Ужь коль не ты, кто нам поможет
> чертить число Небытия . . .
>
> И смысл последний упразднить
> ('Pishi, moi genii' ('Write, my genius'), p. 53)

If not you, then who will help us | draw the number of non-being . . . | and abolish the last bit of meaning.

[37] Mikhail Epshtein, 'Iskusstvo avangarda i religioznoe soznanie', *Novyi mir*, 1989.12, 222–35 (p. 230).

Cultural desolation, so dominant in Krivulin's poetry as part of his myth of the unofficial poet, is written by Mironov into the context of the absolute loss of meaning and ultimately, annihilation. When he writes 'Я брошенный, но кем, когда' ('I was abandoned, but by whom and when', p. 56), he appears to be quoting Krivulin. But unlike Krivulin's text, this is not a poem on the fate of the underground writer; instead it ends on an apocalyptic vision for the whole world: 'И мир окажется тогда игрушкою урода' ('And then the world will turn out to be a monster's toy').[38] The radical negation of meaning in the conventional sense suggests a reading as cultural commentary, that is, a statement to the effect that Soviet culture has unhinged the very possibility of things making sense. Seeking ecstasy in the sensual pleasures of the present moment, then, is the only way in which man can assert himself as a living human being under these conditions.[39]

Mikhail Berg has argued that the ritual crossing of boundaries is somehow capable of liberating the true meaning of religious images that have become submerged by the sediments of time and practice:

> [. . .] use the zones of power that personify the repressed consciousness [. . .] and engage in incessant play, [showing] how the rigid connection of 'sin-repentance' in the space of totalitarian culture can become an instrument for the liberation of sacral energy.[40]

Mironov's 'ritual crossing of boundaries' takes the form of references to sex, and sex in combination with religion in particular. Berg's argument echoes Mikhail Epshtein's attempt at conceptualizing the religious aspects of 'post-modern' Russian literature, especially his in places very loose definition of the apparently meaningless or aggressively non-figurative 'anti-art' of the avant-garde as a form of holy-foolishness, to the point that he declares blasphemy a quasi-'Protestant cleansing' of the original meaning of faith.[41] This is a radical argument that cannot be consistently applied to the poetry of Mironov, Krivulin, or the other poets of their circle. Nevertheless, it points

[38] 'Ia broshennyi, no kem, kogda', p. 56. Compare Krivulin's 'Из брошенных кто-то, из бывших | не избран и даже не зван' ('One of the abandoned has-beens, | not chosen and not even called') ('Na kryshe', p. 103). These lines have precedents in Pushkin ('Poet') and Merezhkovskii ('Deti nochi').

[39] In the words of the biblical sage: 'Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favours what you do. [. . .] Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days' (Ecclesiastes 9. 7–9).

[40] *Literaturokratiia*, p. 167.

[41] 'Iskusstvo avangarda i religioznoe soznanie', p. 224. Epshtein's discussion first and foremost concerns conceptualism and sots-art in the visual arts, but his observations, especially with regard to the power of negation, can also be applied to Mironov: 'Art sinks into squalor in order to commune with the lot of the Godhead, to follow him on the path of shame and derision. [. . .] Here, the religious impulse appears not as the objective to assert oneself, but as a moment of self-abnegation' (p. 223).

to a satisfactory alternative direction for the interpretation of their poetry, one that delivers the reader from the temptation to focus exclusively on this poetry's 'quotational' nature as an abortive rerun of selected aspects of Russian modernism, conditioned exclusively by the Soviet socio-cultural situation.

When read attentively, the following lines by Krivulin point in the same direction:

> все в дух обратится.
> Вселенная запаха! примешь ли тленную душу
> цветов и цветов очевидца?
> [. . .] обнимешь ли
> [. . .] всей памятью небывшего рая
> ('V tsvetakh' ('In flower'), p. 14)

Everything turns to smell. | Universe of smell! Will you accept the rotten soul | of flower and the eyewitness of flowers? | [. . .] will you envelop | [. . .] with the entire memory of the paradise that never was

Dukh here means smell or scent, but it also means 'spirit'. And 'eyewitness' is one of the roles Krivulin habitually uses to describe the poet. Thus we are dealing with the familiar set of images: memory and nostalgia for the past are in the centre yet treated with irony (the memory is 'drunken'), while the poetic present is presented as fleeting and unreliable. 'Paradise' is described as something that 'never was'—an indication that the poet was not at all helplessly pining for a former Golden (or Silver) Age, but merely toying with the myth of an 'ideal' literary past.

The specific climate of the late Soviet age created its own framework, in which questions of literary legacy and tradition served as a point of departure for an original aesthetic that was true to its time. A reading of the statements about cultural poverty and anaemia solely as laments about the wretched situation of the 'spiritual' poet in 1970s Soviet Russia ignores their most important function. The playful inferiority complex towards the Silver Age, combined with a defiant self-confidence, represents the flavour of an age that struggled, like any age, to integrate, and ultimately overcome, the preceding one. This original aesthetic extends to the notion of the 'sacred' in language. In 1970s Leningrad, poetic language made no claim as to its ability to approach, or praise, God. Krivulin and Mironov belonged to a generation whose poetics was as far removed from figurative 'church' language as it was from the use of symbols striving for transcendence. The 'religious reality' experienced by these poets resists description by words. Yet paradoxically, through the act of writing poetry that is itself invested with religious significance, this reality comes to life in the literary word.

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